

TIMOR MULATA

By MARIA DA COSTA ROQUE

For centuries the island of Timor has lain far removed from the great events of the world. Inhabited by natives of Papuan, Malayan, and Polynesian stock, it was discovered in the beginning of the sixteenth century and occupied by the Portuguese. In the seventeenth century the Dutch expelled their Portuguese rivals from the southwestern part of the island, and after sporadic conflicts the boundary was fixed by two treaties in 1859 and 1893, which gave some 7,500 square miles to Portugal and some 5,000 square miles to the Netherlands. With a rather dry climate and hence less fertile than the islands to the west, such as Bali and Java, Timor rarely impinged upon the consciousness of the world until, on December 17, Australian and Dutch forces unexpectedly occupied its Portuguese part, thus kindling anew the centuries-old hostility between the Iberian and the Anglo-Dutch peoples which was once a fixed feature of world politics. Great Britain's action against what she sometimes called her oldest ally caused a sensation and focused the eyes of the world on Timor. Is it the first step toward an attempted seizure of other Portuguese possessions, the Azores, the Madeira and Cape Verde Islands, her colonies in Africa?

The following short story, written a few weeks before the invasion, is particularly timely. Its young authoress, the daughter of a Portuguese officer of the Timor garrison, has lived for many years in Dili, the capital of the island. Educated in Lisbon, she has published several essays and stories in "O Diabo" and other Lisbon journals. This is her first story in English.—K.M.

It was Menna's last night in her father's bungalow, high up in the mountains overlooking the little coastal city of Dili. It was almost midnight. A gentle breeze moved the pale pink curtains at the French windows and the mosquito net around her bed. She gazed through the net into her room and thought she must be dreaming. Reality was far away and dim, as dim as her surroundings. Her mind wandered idly.

In one corner her maid, Tula, was sleeping peacefully, her plump form showing darkly behind the white gauze around the bed, the skirt-like *lipa* folded across her legs and red bracelets on her arms and ankles. She slept the sleep of the saints. She was untouched and undisturbed by life, untroubled and confident.

Menna sighed. Lifting one arm she touched the mosquito net which enveloped her like a dream woven of gauze and silk thread: it choked her, left her breathless and tired. She sat up

in bed, stiff and erect, and kicked her feet from under the thin linen sheet, hugging her knees to her breast. Her surroundings seemed strange to her. Only Tula in the corner was real, Tula with the colorful *lipa* and the stunning bracelets. Menna herself had never been allowed to wear them. She, with her Lisbon education, was the daughter of a white man who had settled down in Timor and married the richest and most beautiful native girl on the island—a girl whose father, a high chieftain, the famous Catholic *regulo* of Atsabe, had under him twelve chiefs from other villages. The old man was still alive, still alert and energetic, and he was occasionally invited by the Portuguese Governor to receptions in the capital.

Menna was very proud of her *regulo* grandfather. Unlike the other natives he did not possess many wives. Though a good Catholic himself, he did not forbid the fetishistic inclinations of his

subjects, in whose little mud houses hideously carved wooden images could be seen in every corner. Once in a while she had followed him on his occasional visits to the villages near by and had been fascinated by the things she saw there: the women who chewed lime and betel until their mouths were stained the color of blood; the strange weddings where the bride was carried away by the groom, who in exchange would give her parents some pieces of rubber, a chicken, or a goat.

Her grandfather had smiled at her astonishment and had patted her head with a show of protection and pride: he was different, he was a Catholic. And to prove this silent assertion to her, he had allowed her to be present at one of the dinners he gave in his house of marble and slate, a little toy set among the rubber trees. The Governor of Timor himself had been present. After discussing the state of affairs of his subjects, the *regulo* had got up, imposing in his attire, barefooted, the collar of his white shirt conspicuous above the navy blue coat, a checked skirt reaching down to his thin ankles. He was a renowned autocrat of the jungle, and, as his chiefs soberly assembled about him, their felt hats in their hands, square cut cotton shirts falling to their red *lipas*, and their dark bead necklaces softly swaying with every movement of their heads, Menna had had the impression that the whole island of Timor was gathered amicably about Portugal, represented by the Governor looking at them from across the room with complacent benevolence.

At the recollection of this scene Menna smiled, wistfully gazing around her, her eyes once more attracted by her maid who still slept, a simple soul communicating with a different world. To be peaceful and calm like Tula, to be natural and gay, to be a native—a true native. She envied her servant more than ever: Tula's mother would never be buried, as was Menna's, on the highest point of the sacred mountain Tata-Mai-Lau. She could not boast of a *regulo* grandfather, who paid his

tribute to the Portuguese Governor in such a matter-of-fact, mild, and condescending way. Tula had not been educated in Lisbon, she did not wear the most expensive gowns from Paris and America. Tula would never experience Menna's social success or have fascinated Portuguese suitors following her exotic, perturbing beauty, the beauty of a half-caste, a *mulata*, as her friends in Portugal used to call her. Nor would Tula ever, like Menna with her "figure of bronze and eyes of coal," attract a European who was to marry her the very next day and take her away from Timor into a different world, a world Menna knew but did not love, a world of conflicts and clashing races.

Again Menna called to her mind the image of her fiancé and tried to visualize the event that was to take place within a few hours. It was to be a grand wedding, her marriage to Dr. Manuel Pereira, and practically all Timor had been invited. Already the city of Dili was in an uproar, and the Church Matriz had been decorated by the missionaries who had baptized her and given her the first Communion. She had been very proud that she was going to marry a white man. On her dainty pink desk lay letters of congratulation from her friends in Lisbon. Suddenly they seemed insignificant and meaningless. She hugged her knees more closely to her breast and sighed again. Unexpectedly her pride had left her, and as her eyes roamed about the little European room with the tropical background she trembled. Brown and white. . . .

She had been happy in Lisbon, she had enjoyed her success as a *mulata*. But always in her heart there had hovered a shadow, darkening even the happiest hours. Only the clasp of Manuel's hand had seemed to make that shadow disappear. With him she had hoped to banish it forever.

Now she was back in Timor, her Timor. The European surroundings seemed more then ever strange to her. Only Tula's figure was real, and as she lay there she seemed to represent Timor

itself, challenging, disturbing, haunting. Impatiently Menna lifted the mosquito net and jumped out of bed, barefooted, her long wavy hair falling to her shoulders, the white nightgown clinging to her slim, lithe body. She found herself facing her long mirror, and for many minutes she gazed at herself. Then she covered her face with her hands. Brown and white... the words seemed to burn deep into all her thoughts.

Seizing one of the *lipas* lying forgotten at one end of Tula's bed, Menna tore the thin nightgown from her body and put on the *lipa* instead. In one corner of the room, bracelets made of almonds and colored seeds gave a tropical air to her maid's belongings. Quickly Menna adorned her own arms and legs with them and defiantly went once more towards the mirror. She smiled rapturously at her own image, then tears welled up in her eyes, and falling on her knees in front of the mirror she murmured, "Queen... Queen... Queen Menna!"

The spirit of the royal blood coursing in her veins had been overwhelmingly awakened within her. As in a trance she found herself walking past the lawn surrounding the house out into the plantation, whose odd aspect used to keep her wondering at the lack of agricultural sense of her father's slaves who so indifferently mixed the branches of coffee and rubber trees. Clinging to the trunks, the five-foot cotton plants opened their white flowers, soon to be plucked by the native women. At the foot of the coconut palms queer gods of black wood ruled the night. Big vampire bats flew close to her head, and monkeys, huddling close to each other on the coconut palms, uttered queer sounds in their sleep. Some screamed and moved about, an expression of angry protest on their almost human little faces. She went on, irresistibly drawn forward, undisturbed by the life of the jungle. Her delicate bare feet felt the ground where during the day snakes and insects crept. They would not harm her. She was their queen and she was going

back to her kingdom, the kingdom she had almost abandoned.

A low fence separated her from the rubber and cotton plantation of Jau, her father's rival. The people of Dili said that in his plantation there flowed rivers of gold. Though a native of Java, Jau now belonged to Timor. Lean and brown he was, savage but gentle, a true native. Menna envied him. He had studied with her at the Catholic School in Dili. His best friends had always been among the whites. Nevertheless he had refused an education in Europe. When she left for Lisbon he had been at the pier, waving his panama hat, a dark note among her numerous friends. When Menna returned with her fiancé he had been there again, and had fixed upon her a strange, sad look. Without knowing why, she had trembled, taking her fiancé's arm in an urgent desire for protection and love.

Love. Had it been love which made her accept Manuel's proposal, or had it been pride? She did not know. She only knew now that she did not belong to his world. What she really yearned for was the life around her, so vivid and intense even in its sleep, strangely akin to the deep throbbing in her heart.

She opened the gate that separated her from Jau. She longed to see him before her wedding, to see him at this moment when her soul was filled with strange revelations. She found herself in front of his bungalow, and, still as in a trance, she felt herself drawn to the veranda. In the shadows she saw a figure and recognized Jau's broad shoulders and curly head; she stopped in front of him and knew that he had been waiting for her.

She had found Jau, she had found herself. All around her the jungle slept, vast, calm, and silent. The faraway shadow of Tata-Mai-Lau fell over it as it had fallen over her heart even in Lisbon.

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The wedding ceremony was over. With Manuel at her side, Menna spoke to the people around her, from time to

time shaking the clinging veil from off her face. After the rapture of the night before she was more than ever conscious of the strangeness of her new surroundings. She saw her father talking happily to Major Fontes, the Governor, and she forced herself to turn to Manuel and smile at him.

Surrounded by his twelve chiefs, her *regulo* grandfather chatted in one corner with Dr. Souza, Director of the Customs, her godfather on whose arm she had entered the Church Matriz and who had given her away. He was about to make a speech and after him would come her father and grandfather. But first she must cut the cake and pass it to her maid Tula, who, helped by the natives, would in turn serve it to the guests. How queer they looked to her, these guests, who so happily mixed race and dialect. There were the Portuguese employees of the Camara Municipal and the Customs, with their wives, looking distinguished and refined in their best dark silk attire. Not far from them the native women of Timor made a bright splash of color, their great gold earrings shaking as they nodded their heads and laughed. Their husbands looked altogether uncomfortable in their frock coats, their feet painfully squeezed into patent leather shoes, their necks erect in the stiff collars. Everyone talked at the same time. Menna could hear the dialects of the different provinces of Timor clashing with the refined and simple language of Lisbon and the cultivated conceited Portuguese of Dili.

There stood the notorious Dona Belmira, a native of Ossu, three times a widow and engaged to be married for the fourth time to a Portuguese whom she had met in India. She was fanning herself with a huge feather, her crimson dress in brilliant contrast to her dark skin. She was surrounded by a group of admiring men and occasionally laughed aloud, attracting the attention of the *regulo*, whose expression of disgust was faithfully repeated by his twelve chiefs.

Padre Antonio de Jesus, the Dominican missionary who had performed

the marriage ceremony, occasionally fixed upon Menna his keen look that touched her soul and comforted it. She had confessed to him a few minutes before her wedding. There was sadness in his eyes as he watched her.

Presently her father and the Governor came and escorted her to the banquet table. From Tula's hand she took the knife and pushed it deep into the white frosted cake. Then Manuel led the guests forward.

Her godfather was about to speak. A silence fell upon the large room, broken only by one of Dona Belmira's nervous laughs. Again the *regulo* glared at her, but Dr. Souza smiled and started his speech. He pronounced a few simple phrases and, as the guests clapped their hands, turned to the Governor and asked him to honor them with a few words.

Major Fontes smiled a calm, superior smile. Turning his head from side to side he spoke in a firm, loud, military voice:

"It would be useless for me to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, the history of the bride's illustrious family. We know of her noble descent." He turned to the *regulo* who calmly returned his look. "I have little to say of the family of Dr. Manuel Pereira, distinguished and celebrated throughout the country. Let me pronounce instead a few words on the moral aspect of this wedding. I cannot express how much I appreciate this reception, where we all mix so naturally. This has been Portugal's sole wish: to be friendly with Timor, to accept Timor's sons as her sons."

Turning to the bride's grandfather he added:

"I have had the pleasure of dealing with the honorable *regulo* of Atsabe in government affairs, and I am proud to say that no disagreement of any sort has ever come between us. Hoping for a future similar to the past, I wish at the same time a happy future for the bride and groom. To this I raise my glass."

The *vivas* of the guests filled the room and for a moment the confusion of dialects and babbling of voices made Menna's head whirl. The one silent guest was the native owner of an important soap factory who felt dreadfully uncomfortable in his European attire and moved restlessly in his chair, shifting his feet uneasily.

A respectful silence fell over the guests as the *regulo* rose.

"Most illustrious ladies, most illustrious gentlemen!" he said in a studied, trembling voice. "There is little I can say, being the grandfather of the bride. Her happiness shall be my happiness. Instead I shall be glad to speak on the subject so graciously invoked by His Excellency who has pointed to the friendly relations between Portugal and this island. I dare say that we appreciate it even more than the Portuguese. We shall always be grateful for the help the Portuguese missionaries gave us in 1641 against the king of Macassar, whose 'Paradise of Mohammed' we refused, accepting instead the comforting doctrine of Christ. From that moment on we belonged to Portugal. We yielded our souls. Since then we have been and always shall be faithful to Portugal, our fatherland."

Shouting and clapping shook the rafters as the speech came to a close and, as the Governor advanced towards him, the *regulo* looked more impressive than ever, the medals gleaming on his navy blue coat, his feet bare, and his gray felt hat lying on a vacant chair surrounded by twelve men.

Finally Menna's father got up in his turn and, quieting the commotion in the hall, spoke a few sentimental phrases. A wave of genuine feeling swept over the guests. To break the tension, Manuel summoned the servants, drinks were served, and in a short while everyone was happy and at ease.

Little groups formed here and there. Dr. Souza, Senor Pereira and Padre Antonio chatted in one corner, in another the *regulo* and the Governor exchanged views and explored each other's

character. The owner of the soap factory took off his shoes and wandered about uttering sighs of relief. The Portuguese women of Dili gathered about Menna. Although very pale, she was calm and composed. Manuel had asked her to join him in the garden as soon as she could escape from the crowd. Finally she managed to excuse herself and slip away to the palm tree where Manuel was waiting. As he took her in his arms she drew away, whispering, "I am dreadfully tired and confused, Manuel. Would you leave me to myself for a little while?"

He kissed her tenderly, and as she turned and stumbled, he knelt in front of her, laughing and teasing her about her clumsiness.

"I can no longer walk in these high heels. I think I shall go barefoot instead."

Manuel answered with a condescending pat on her arm, and with a "Well, take off your shoes then," he turned and left her.

Menna went to her room. She rapidly changed into a *lipa* and adorned her arms and legs with the bracelets of the previous night. Her duty as a Catholic had been carried out. She had promised Padre Antonio to become Manuel's wife, and this she now had done. But here her duty ended. Gazing at her reflection in the mirror, in front of which she had fallen in adoration the night before, she smiled sadly.

Quietly she slipped out of the house. Evening had brought darkness to her beloved Timor, but the night was clear and warm. She could hear the steady buzz of voices from the hall, but still louder and more distinctly could she hear the call from within her heart, the call of Tata-Mai-Lau. In the past she had sometimes felt the presence of the god of the mountains, her mother's god, but last night for the first time she had felt his blessing. He would comfort her now. At peace with herself at last, she entered the land of shadows.